

WE ARE GATHERED HERE THIS EVENING TO CELEBRATE THE ANNIVERSARY OF ONE OF THE MOST
TRAUMATIC NIGHTS IN HISTORY. THE EVENTS OF MAUNDY THURSDAY OCCURED IN SUCH RAPID SUCCE-
SSION AND WITH SUCH IMPORTANCE THAT WE ARE LEFT SPEECHLESS AS WE SURVEY THEM. THE
EVENING BEGAN WITH JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES GATHERING AROUND A TABLE FOR WHAT WOULD BE
THEIR LAST MEAL TOGETHER BEFORE OUR LORD'S DEATH. AND THE WORDS HE SPOKE ON THAT
OCCASION HAVE BEEN REPEATED BY CHRISTIAN MEN FOR TWO THOUSAND YEARS. [AFTER THE MEAL
THERE WAS THE AGONY OF GETHSEMANE, THE BETRAYAL AND ARREST, THE MOCK TRIAL AND LASTLY
PETER'S DENIAL.

WHEN JESUS WAS ARRESTED ALL THE DISCIPLES FLED IN FEAR BUT ONE / PETER. / PETER ALONE
FOLLOWED THE TORCH LIT PROCESSION AS JESUS WAS TAKEN AWAY BY HIS CAPTORS, / PETER ALONE
WAITED IN THE COURTYARD WHILE JESUS WAS QUESTIONED AND MOCKED IN THE HOUSE OF THE HIGH
PRIEST. ~~THE~~ ^{NO} DOUBT HE TRIED TO BE AS INCONSPICUOUS AS POSSIBLE AS HE WARMED HIMSELF.—
BY THE FIRE. / BUT THEN TRAGEDY STRUCK, A MAID WHO HAD BEEN WATCHING HIM CLOSELY TOLD
SOME OTHERS ["THIS MAN ALSO WAS WITH HIM."] HOW SHOCKED PETER MUST HAVE BEEN AND BEFORE
HE KNEW IT HE HAD SAID ["WOMAN, I DO NOT KNOW HIM."] WE ALL HAVE HAD THIS EXPERIENCE

OF BEING SURPRISED BY AN UNEXPECTED QUESTION AND AUTOMATICALLY TELLING AN UNTRUTH, WITHOUT THINKING. IT WAS ONLY A FEW MINUTES LATER THAT THE SAME SITUATION PRESENTED ITSELF, AND ONCE AGAIN PETER DENIED EVEN KNOWING JESUS. WHEN IT HAPPENED AGAIN, A THIRD TIME PETER WAS CAUGHT, HE HAD TO BE CONSISTENT AND THIS TIME HE REPLIED SHARPLY WITH A CURSE FOR EMPHASIS "I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT." IT WAS THEN THAT PETER LOOKED UP TO SEE JESUS AND THEIR EYES MET. WHAT A WELL OF EMOTION MUST HAVE PASSED BETWEEN THEIR EYES IN THAT FLEETING GLANCE. HE REMEMBERED HOW JESUS HAD SAID THAT BEFORE THE NIGHT WAS OVER, HE, PETER, WOULD DENY HIS LORD. THE AGONY WAS UNBEARABLE AND THE STRONG FISHERMAN FELT TEARS BURNING DOWN HIS CHEEKS.

HE HAD TRIED, / OH HOW HE HAD TRIED! WHILE THE OTHERS FLED PETER WAS DETERMINED TO FOLLOW JESUS TO THE END. PETER WAS NOT A MAN TO BE AFRAID / HE WAS A BOISTROUS FISHERMAN, LOUD AND OUTSPOKEN, HIS LIFE HAD BEEN SPENT PULLING IN HUNDREDS OF POUNDS OF NETTED FISH WHILE STRUGGLING AGAINST THE GALLILEAN WAVES ~~XXX~~ AND WIND. BUT NOW, WHEN THE CHIPS WERE DOWN HIS PERENNIAL COURAGE HAD ABANDON HIM. [HE HAD DENIED KNOWING HIS LORD TO SAVE HIMSELF.] TO ME THIS EPISODE IN THE LIFE OF PETER IS THE EPITOME OF AGONY AND ANXIETY. IT IS GLARING IN ITS ACCOUNT OF HUMAN FRAILTY, / REGARDLESS OF OUR DETERMINATION WE FREQUENTLY FALL DOWN.

PETER WAS SO HUMAN IN HIS FRAILTY. WE CANNOT BE TOO HARD ON HIM, AFTER ALL HIS COMPANIONS HAD LONG SINCE RUN FOR COVER. ONLY PETER HAD THE COURAGE TO GO THIS FAR. HE IS A GOOD CARICATURE OF ALL MANKIND OF US: HIS EARTHY HONESTY, HIS WELL MEANT QUESTIONS, HIS OVER ENTHUSIASM AND HIS FAILING.

AS HE LEFT THE COURTYARD WITH TEARS STREAMING DOWN HIS FACE HE MUST HAVE RECALLED HOW A FEW SHORT HOURS BEFORE JESUS HAD HANDED HIM BREAD AND SAID THIS IS MY BODY WHICH IS BROKEN FOR YOU." AND SLOWLY, UNDERSTANDING CREPT THROUGH HIS SORROW, / JESUS WAS DYING FOR HIM / THAT'S WHAT THE WORDS AT THE TABLE MEANT. / JESUS KNEW THAT PETER WOULD FAIL, / THAT HIS BEST WOULD NOT BE GOOD ENOUGH. / JESUS KNEW THAT WHAT HE MUST DO, HE MUST DO ALONE, / PETER COULD NOT HELP ANY BY DYING. / AND THEN HE REMEMBERED THE MOMENT IN THE COURTYARD WHEN HIS EYES MET JESUS. THERE WAS NO CONTEMPT OR DISDAIN IN JESUS' EYES AS HE LOOKED AT HIS DISCIPLE THAT ^{DENIED} ~~REXKKE~~ KNOWING HIM, / ONLY THE TENDER FORGIVENESS THAT HAD ALWAYS BEEN THERE. PETER SUDDENLY REALIZED THAT HE HAD BEEN FORGIVEN; THAT HE WOULD ALWAYS BE FORGIVEN: / THAT JESUS WAS DYING FOR HIM -- FOR PETER -- THE POOR, SINFUL FISHERMAN. NOW THE ANXIETY OF SORROW TURNED TO ANXIETY OF ANTICIPATION. PETER COULD NOT WAIT TO BEGIN ANEW WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT NO MATTER HOW OFTEN HE FAILED HIS LORD WOULD FORGIVE - WITH A NEW FRESHNESS AND VITALITY PETER LOOKED TO THE FUTURE, HE WOULD TRY HARDER THAN EVER, / JESUS BODY WAS BROKEN FOR HIM. / HE WAS THE FIRST TO BOLT INTO THE EMPTY TOMB, HE WAS THE ONE TO STAND UP TO A HOSTILE JEERING MOB AT PENTECOST AND DELIVER AN ORATION

THAT WAS THE SPARK THAT BEGAN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH. WITH A NEW VIGOR, PETER NOW SAID
IN ALL THAT HE DID "THIS LORD IS MY BODY WHICH I GIVE TO YOU."

PETER'S EXPERIENCE THAT NIGHT IS WHAT WE NOW DO OURSELVES. JESUS CHRIST INVITES
US TO THE COMMUNION TABLE TO DINE WITH HIM, TO EACH ONE OF US INDIVIDUALLY HE SAYS,
"THIS IS MY BODY THAT IS BROKEN FOR YOU."

AT THAT TABLE WE MAY FIND FORGIVENESS THAT HE ALONE CAN GIVE. OUR LORD KNOWS WE
ARE FRAIL, HE WELL KNOWS OUR FUMELING, FAILING ATTEMPTS TO BE FAITHFUL. WHEN WE HAVE
DENIED HIM IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, IN SOME LITTLE UNTRUTH, OR IN AN UNTHINKING ACT
THAT HAS HURT SOMEONE ELSE, OR WHEN WE SIMPLY GO ALONG WITH THE CROWD TO AVOID BEING
CONSPICUOUS, JESUS CHRIST LOOKS AT US TOO. HIS EYES HOLD NO CONTEMPT FOR US REGARDLESS OF
WHAT WE HAVE DONE, JUST THE DEEP FORGIVENESS THAT OVERWHELMED PETER. HE DOES NOT TURN
US AWAY FROM HIS TABLE: ALL HE ASKS IS THAT WE, LIKE PETER, REALIZE OUR FAILINGS, THEN
WE ARE WELCOME, THEN WE MAY PARTAKE FULLY OF THE BODY THAT WAS BROKEN FOR US.

EVEN THOUGH WE ARE RAPIDLY APPROACHING OUR LORD'S DEATH THIS IS A JOYFUL OCCASION.
AS WE PARTAKE OF THE ELEMENTS, KNOWING WE ARE FORGIVEN WE CAN FIND RENEWAL AND CONFIDENCE
AND DETERMINATION TO STRIVE EVEN HARDER REGARDLESS OF OUR FAILINGS. WE ARE INVITED TO
DINE WITH HIM WHO DIED THAT WE MIGHT LIVE, THIS IS THE SOURCE OF OUR JOY, THIS IS THE
CAUSE OF OUR NEWNESS AND VITALITY.

[BUT LET US NOT BE SILENT GUESTS AT OUR LORD'S TABLE. AS WE DINE LET US READILY
 RETURN THE CONVERSATION IN THE ONLY TERMS SUITABLE, / LET US PLEDGE ANEW OUR LOYALTY
 TO THE CHRIST, / LET US EACH ONE PRESENT OUR LIVES TO HIM AND JOYFULLY SAY BACK, ["THIS
 LORD IS MY LIFE WHICH I GIVE TO THEE, TAKE THEE, ALL OF IT."] THIS IS THE TRUE MEANING
 OF "COMMUNION" / IT CANNOT BE A ONE WAY AFFAIR / TO TRULY PARTICIPATE WE MUST PRESENT
 JESUS CHRIST WITH OUR ANSWER. HE HAS GIVEN HIS BODY FOR US, HE HAS FORGIVEN US FOR
 ALL THAT WE HAVE DONE: WILL WE DENY HIM AGAIN? OR WILL WE RENEW OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH
 HIM.

THIS IS THE WAY TO NEW LIFE, THIS IS THE INVITATION THAT, TONIGHT, RINGS DOWN THROUGH
 THE CENTURIES, / WHAT WILL BE YOUR ANSWER? ?